WITH ALL YOUR HEART

November 3, 1985, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

"...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Scripture
Psalms 119:33-48
Deuteronomy 6:4-9
Mark 12:28-34

How in the world does one go about loving God? Where does one begin? Over the years of sporadic reflecting on the nature of things most of us have known something of awe, reverence, perhaps wariness and fear. But love for God? We love our wives and husbands, our parents and children, our friends and lovers: we love Beethoven and chocolate chip cookies, the Bears, the Bulls, the Black Hawks and sunny fall days. And when we love we translate the inclinations of the heart into behavior that can be wildly improbable -- we weep over Beethoven, buy silly, extravagant gifts for a lover, cheer and stomp and agonize over the Sunday afternoon exploits of a new folk hero we know affectionately as "The Refrigerator!" We translate the ardor of the heart to some kind of commitment, some replacement of our immediate agenda with the agenda of the beloved and it feels right and good so to do. But, how in the world does one go about loving God?

In her delightful spiritual journal, The Irrational Season, popular author Madaleine L'Engle tells about a conversation she had with a minister in which he criticized her use of adjectives which seemed to limit God. Reflecting on the conversation she wrote a wonderful prayer...and called it a Love Letter...

LOVE LETTER ADDRESSED TO:
Your immanent eminence
wholly transcendent,
permanent in firmament
holy, resplendent,
other and awful
incomprehensible,
mysterium tremendum
mysterium fascinans
infinite wisdom
one indivisible,
ex nihil creator
unbegun, unbeginning
complete, but unending
wind-weaving, sun spinning
ruthless, unbending.

Eternal compassion
helpless before you
I, Lord, in my fashion
love and adore you.

Amen (P152)

One time a lawyer was listening in on a discussion Jesus was having with some religious zealots on the topic of eternal life -- the resurrection. The lawyer asked a question, perhaps to embarrass Jesus, perhaps to force him to take a public position which might put him in trouble with the authorities, perhaps because he was genuinely intrigued with Jesus's unique handling of religious tradition. He asked: "Which commandment is the first of all?" What is the greatest, most important of our religious traditions? There was really very little Jesus could say other than what he said: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one: and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength." Everyone knew that. That's the Shema -- from the Hebrew word for "Hear": the beginning of the code of Deuteronomy. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord -- Yahweh -- is one. You shall love the Lord." It is said at the beginning of the Synagog service, it is recited twice daily, worn in the phylactery, inscribed on the doorpost.

Historically, the Shema is the early and eloquent confession of faith that sets Israel apart from the people around her who were busy worshipping a lot of local deities, each with an individual altar or sanctury: It is the rallying point of early monotheism, someone said. It is the bedrock, the genius of Judaism. God is one -- and the basic human imperative is to acknowledge that oneness and to love God.

And then Jesus amended his answer. He reached into the tradition again, this time to an obscure sentence in the Book of Leviticus. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He seemed to combine the two into one imperative: "There is no other commandment greater than these" he said, as if the one needed the other to stand. Indeed, that is the Judeo-Christian genius: love of God, which could be a rootless abstraction, is tied to love of neighbor. Love of neighbor which could be simple humanism, is tied to love of God. Together they make a rich theological/ethical brew.

The overwhelming weight of Christian attention, however, has been on the side of that second commandment, known as the Golden Rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." The earliest bit of homiletical advice I received was from a long-time Presbyterian, who had seen many preachers come and go, and when I came home from seminary to preach once during the summer allowed as how he was very weary of the topical sameness he had been hearing over the years and that if he had to sit through another sermon of the Lord's Prayer or a sermon on the Golden Rule he was going to stand up and protest that he had already heard everything there is to say on the topic.

I have not always been guided by that threat, but I have never preached on either without wondering whether he had any soul mates in my congregation of the morning. Subconsciously, which is how these things ought to work, I think his threat has moved me to reconcentrate on the first and greatest commandment -- the one to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The one, I have concluded, we leave too quickly, either because the Golden Rule is more interesting, or because we don't really know what to make of this one. We may not always want to love our neighbor, but at least we know how to begin. So let us consider...to love God with all your heart.

The Deuteronomic imperative to love God sets forth the basic Biblical assertion that our posture in relation to the creator is not one of fear, or awe or guilt, but love. At the beginning Biblical religion is other-directed: the initial Biblical word to us is a bidding to get out of ourselves. Our first religious duty is to regard, not self, but the creator. The earliest Biblical assertion about us is that we are made to be in relationship with God, in fact, we are incomplete until we acknowledge and affirm that relationship. St. Augustine said it best: "O Lord, thou hast made our hearts restless until they find their rest in thee ..." In the Bible, it's not so much that terrible things will happen to us unless we love God, it is simply that we will never be fully human, fully what we can be, until we love the one who has created us.

The best of our Jewish tradition, the tradition which belonged to Jesus and which he affirmed every opportunity he had, is that God is to be loved for God's sake, not for the rewards it will produce. That position has always been sharply in contrast to the kind of religion which promises results and rewards. Have you noticed how the most popular religions today appeal essentially to the self? Have you noticed the religious best sellers: how to be religious and successful in business, have great sex, lose weight, score thirty points a game or at least find peace of heart...?

Martin Marty has written that "in affluent cultures, a shift in the way of looking at reality has occured." We now know that shift as the New Narcissism, the Mc Generation, the almost pathological obsession with self described by Robert Bellah et al. in Habits of the Heart. That important book argues that our culture has simply turned self-centered, selfish... and suggests as evidence "submersion in career, wanton consumerism, retreat from public life, cynicism about politics, fear of commitment in personal relationships...and a "therapeutic ethic" which enshrines personal fulfillment and self-knowledge as life's paramount goals. (See The Wilson Quarterly, Autumn 1985 P145) Marty uses the rubric of "Entitlement" to describe it. Our population he argues, "has acquired a taste for entitlements. We demand the right to basic satisfaction." And while that may be appropriate politically, what has happened in the latter quarter of the twentieth century is that "entitlement" thinking has infected religion. "Universe, world, God (we) seem to say, you owe me that quick fix, the sunshine in the heart, the readiness to smile...In the world of the practical, God is loved for the sake of one's self, for the self's purposes, and for the yield of this relation to the reward of eternal life." (A Cry of Absence, P33, 59)

You shall love God with all your heart...The best of Biblical religion teaches love of God for God's sake, not for what it will produce. Popular religion, on the other hand seems to be powered by a promise of some very real rewards, material or at least emotional, or, the threat of punishment. Sooner or later it seems, religion gets around to saying something like: "love God for what it will do for you" and, if you can't do that, "love God or else." I was privileged this past week to hear Education Secretary William Bennett address the problem of school dropouts and the Administration's effort to deal with it by linking the private sector to public education.

One time the Chief Executive Officer of Pizza Hut came to him with the now famous scheme to reward students for reading two extra books with a personal, free, pan pizza. Mr. Humphrey thought it had great promise and would probably motivate younsters to read a lot. Secretary Bennett, who likes to think of himself first as a scholar, listened and nodded and then noted that Aristotle taught that learning ought to happen not for the rewards it will produce, but for the pure joy of learning. Mr. Humphrey listened and said, "That's true, but then Aristotle probably never tasted a pan pizza."

Popular religion markets Jesus as a good investment, either for short-term profit -- or long-term growth. But the richest and best of our tradition teaches that religion begins with love of God with the whole heart, unreserved love of God for God's sake. In his important latest book, Eternal Life, Catholic theologian Hans Kung writes: "All the patriarchs of Israel; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and the Judges, the kings and prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, for their part passed (from life) into darkness: and yet they had lived and acted in unswerving belief in God. For more than a thousand years, none of these Jews believed in the resurrection of the dead, or in an eternal life, or in the positive sense of a Christian heaven. With remarkable consistency they concentrated on the present world, without bothering about what was, in any case, a dismal, dark, hopeless hereafter." (P83)

We have something to learn from that depth of love that does not need, nor ask for guarantees. We have something to learn from a trust in God's sovereignty over all of life, including death, that we can simply and strongly, turn over to God our future, without insisting on a warranty. That marvelous Hebrew spirituality is reflected within the best of Christianty, too. Bernard of Clairvaux, in the Middle Ages, told of his mystical vision of a woman carrying a pitcher and a torch. "With the pitcher she would quench the fires of hell and with the torch she would burn the pleasures of heaven. After these were gone, people would be able to love God for God's sake." (Op Cit. Marty P59)

The trouble with practical, result-oriented, entitlement religion, is that it gets into very hot water intellectually when tragedy happens -- as it has a way of happening for all of us. If your religious premise is that God rewards those who love him and punishes those who ignore him, and if you retain even a bit of intellectual honesty, every day will produce a major theological crisis. If love for God produces only good things, and you must deal with the untimely death of someone you love very much, you have a major religious problem to say the least which is what Job and Job's friends argue about. What the oldest of the Biblical traditions teaches us is that a faith strong enough to sustain us, to help us through the inevitable tragedies and losses and crises which come, must let go of the reward-punishment mentality and love God for the simple sake of loving God.

Now there is a venerable Greek heresy alive and well among us which makes us a little uncomfortable with the very notion of loving God, even before the discovery begins. There is a tradition that suggests that our humanity is so corrupt it isn't even appropriate to suggest that we might love God.

Our love, itself, is too tainted. The rubric under which we have learned this lesson is...Agape - Filia - Eros -- the three Greek words for love. You've heard that sermon before, too. Eros -- sexual, erotic love; Filia -- parental, brotherly, sisterly, friendly love; Agape -- divine, selfless, godly love -- God's love for us. And while it is true that there are three Greek words for love, what is not so palpably true is that Agape is wonderful, Filia is okay, and Eros, while necessary for propagating the race, is ethically a little troublesome. That, it seems to me, is what one learns or concludes from hearing too many sermons on love. What we know most about is Eros: what we know next about is Filia: and no one ever suggested that they are appropriate words with which to discuss our love for God...What we are left with is the selflessness of Agape, and that remains opaque, distant. Hebrew religion, the religion of Jesus, didn't have all those words for love. Our duty is to love God wholly, with our whole being, not with an isolated spiritual compartment of the brain. Biblical religion doesn't mean that. That is a Greek heresy. In the interest of making something understandable it takes one reality apart -- human love -- in a way that does terrible violence to it. When you separate Agape from Filia and Eros -- you are left with a wispy abstraction. When you separate Eros from the selfless good will which is Agape, you are left with what a friend of mine eloquently describes as "hormones calling to hormones," pornography, sex for the sake of personal gratification only. And when both Agape and Eros are seen to be different from Filia -- the result is the grim task of trying to sustain relationship without the sustaining joy of friendship, and religion without the intimate relationship of a Lord who is father, mother, brother and sister and friend.

If we want to know what Jesus the Jew meant by loving God we will have to discard this Greek tryptic and recover the Hebrew sense of love's oneness. Why not relate love for God to our experience of love? Why not define love for God by the very best love we know: the love that surprises us with its strength and calls us out of ourselves at the same time it is making us aware of ourselves and allowing us to enjoy ourselves and bringing tears to our eyes because of its sheer magnificent grace?

Why not understand our love for God in terms of the greatest gift he has given us -- that marvelous, inseparable convergence of Agape and Filia and Eros we have for our most intimate lovers and friends.

Love God with all your heart -- with all you are.

Love God, sensually, as the one who fashioned you, who created you as a body with senses and needs and drives and the miraculous capacity to be at one with the creation.

Love God -- as your father, your mother, whose love for you will follow you everywhere: as your brother, sister, dearest friend, who is for you and will always be your advocate, your support, your defender.

Love God mystically, spiritually, -- as the source of your being, the mysterious, unknowable ground of all that is.

Love God with all you are.

Something of that wholeness of love happens in corporate worship, I believe, when choir and organ and congregation physically stand together and join voices and in the best of times, hearts and minds and wills, in the pure, unapologetic praise of God. Something of it happens, I believe, in the honest and spontaneous piety of children, until we reason it out of them.

Madaleine L'Engle finds this wonderfully honest spirituality in the bedtime prayers of her grandchildren: "God, I love to listen to the rain: I love to listen to you talk," one of them prayed once. After asking God to bless family -- mother, father, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins -- and friends and pets, a four-year-old boy prayed, "And God, God bless you, too." (Op Cit. P61) That's at the heart of it.

And something of this wholeness of love is celebrated in great music and art and poetry. When I need to remember I listen or look or ask E. E. Cummings to remind me:

> i thank You God for this most amazing day:
> for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
> and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
> which is natural which is infinite which is yes.

Of course love of God means love of neighbor. Of course the ancient letter writer was correct: if you say you love God and hate your brother or sister you are a liar. Of course love is justice and justice is simply love at work in the world. Of course loving God is hypocricy if it does not open us to and make us vulnerable to the cries of the oppressed, the hungry, the suffering, in Chicago, in Central America, or South Africa. The second commandment is a product of the first. And if we get the first one right, if we love God with all we are, our love for people who suffer will be far deeper and stronger than mild affection -- or mild discomfort at what happens to them. If we get love of God right, love of neighbor can become downright revolutionary.

But, our Lord taught, we begin here, not with a fully developed theology, not with a progressive social ethic, although we are responsible for both, but with love for God -- with all our heart.

The ancient writer to whom Jesus turned when the lawyer asked him about the greatest commandment suggested two remarkable truths.

We become fully human when we love the one who has created us.

That one, whose name is holy, wants us to love him, longs for our love, pursues us for our love, suffers and sends a son to die, not only for the sake of his love, but to call ours out of us.

It is not a prayer you have heard much, nor is it one I have known to be taught, nor is it one which I have either experienced or employed, but I would submit, that the place to begin in response to our Lord's invitation is with this singular prayer. God, I love you.

Amen

Lord of the creation, with all our heart and soul and mind and strength we love you. You have made us restless until we find our rest in you. You have made us wonderfully capable of love: you have put within us the inclination, the desire, the need, the ability. Now call out of us the indescribable, indefinable, unexplainable affection of heart, soul, mind and body. Lord God, we love you: In Jesus Christ. Amen.